

Facts & Information

August 1999

Selecting a long-distance provider

While local telephone competition is not available to the vast majority of us, recent developments in the long-distance telephone market have brought about greater selection and lower rates. Since many of these developments are recent, you might find it profitable to review your long-distance service at this time.

Background

There are two types of toll calls: local toll and long-haul toll.

Local Toll: Local toll calls are made within a specific region (or "LATA"). Washington state is divided into three major LATAs, as depicted in the maps below. Local toll calls are calls made entirely within a LATA. These include, for example, calls between Seattle and Olympia; Spokane and Wenatchee; and Longview and Vancouver. All customers may now choose which company will provide local toll service.

Long-haul Toll: Long-haul toll calls are made between such regions (LATAs), including calls made to other states. Such calls include calls between Seattle and Spokane and Longview and Olympia and Bellingham and Portland. All customers have been able to choose their long-distance toll company for several years.

Local Toll Call Regions (LATAs)



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Local: (360)664-1160
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All UTC publications are
available in alternate formats.
Call (360)664-1133.



Why choose different companies for different types of toll

You may have the same company for both types of toll services or you may have different companies for each type. It is your choice. You might find that the best deal that works for you involves using one provider for your long-haul toll calls and another provider for your local toll calls. You might not.

Why U S West cannot carry long-haul toll calls

Federal law prohibits U S West, as well as the other large local telephone companies that once formed the Bell company, from carrying toll calls between regions (LATAs) until they have met the competitive conditions required of monopoly local telephone companies in the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

How to change your long-distance service provider

Contact the long-distance company of your choice. State whether you want the company for your local toll, for long-haul toll, or for all toll calls. The long-distance company will arrange with your local telephone company to ensure that your toll calls are automatically routed to its long-distance network. Most of the time, the long-distance company will cover the cost associated with switching your calls to them. But check to be sure—it might cost you to change companies.

The purpose of dial around codes (10-10-XXX)

If you're calling from your home, your long-distance calls are automatically routed to your chosen company(s) without having to dial a code. However, if you wish to try a different company without going through the hassle and possible expense of switching companies or if you are away from home and unsure about the long-distance carrier assigned to the phone you are using, you can route your call through a different provider by dialing the specific seven-digit access code before making the call.

But be careful - some companies which offer low per minute rates add a monthly service or surcharge to each call. These extra charges can end up making the cost of the call substantially higher than the advertised price.

Check in-state rates when shopping for new provider

Many long-distance companies have two kinds of rates: a rate for calls between states (the one they post in national advertisements) and another rate for in-state calls (some times higher than the advertised rate). In recent years, some companies have dropped their in-state long-distance rates, but not all have done so. When comparing long-distance service plans, be sure you specify whether you are comparing rates for in-state calls or calls between states.

Look out for additional charges

Many long-distance companies apply charges with descriptions that suggest that they are government fees or mandated by the federal government. Generally, companies that apply these charges are attempting to recover fees that they have to pay to the federal government or to the local telephone company. However, these charges vary between companies. When shopping for long-distance companies, it's worth asking specifically for the amount of these charges so that you can make a fair comparison.

Be careful when comparing advertised rates

Companies advertise rates in different ways. Some companies offer special per minute rates on calls based on their length, destination and day of the week. Others advertise the same low rate all the time, but have monthly service charges. Almost all companies have charges in addition to their advertised rates. When you contact long-distance companies, verify that the advertised rate applies to all the calls you plan on making with the company.

Tips for finding the best long-distance telephone deal

1. Start with your last phone bill

Spend a few minutes looking at your phone bills for the past three months. A review of your past bills may tell you what kind of savings you may or may not realize from a different long-distance plan. If you use more than one long-distance company, be sure to consider all your toll calls in your analysis. Ask these questions:

How much did I spend on toll charges?

What is the per minute charge and how does it vary?

Where did I call the most?

Which calls were the longest?

What time of day were the calls made?

Would I have talked longer if I had known the call would have cost less?

Am I expecting changes that will affect my household toll use?

2. Figure out what you want

Now that you've reviewed your calling patterns, decide on what you want. Do you want a flat-rate anywhere and any time you call, or are you willing to go with cheaper per-minute rates if it means calling during certain time periods or days? Do you use enough toll to justify a monthly fee? If so, what would the per minute savings have to be? There's a wide range of options to choose from, but you can narrow those options down simply by ruling out those you do not want.

3. Contact your existing provider

When you have an idea of what you want, ask your existing long-distance provider. Telephone companies routinely offer new calling plans to new customers without informing existing customers of their availability. It pays to check in with your company periodically to find out if you can score a better deal. At the very least, you will have a calling plan for comparing with others.

Remember that you can select two long-distance providers: one for local toll calls and one for long-distance toll calls. Some companies might offer you a special rate to acquire your business for both types of toll calls. You can find your toll company's toll-free phone number on your bill.

4. Shop around

There are hundreds of long distance companies, and most of them offer multiple plans. There is no single company or plan that is best for every customer. To get started, ask friends and work colleagues who they use; check out the ads in the paper and on television; or search the Internet (many long-distance companies have websites). Attached is a list of the more active companies in Washington.

5. Review the details before committing

Once you find a plan you like, cover all your bases. Have you checked the company's rates for calls made within the state and to other states? Do you know all of the company's monthly charges, including FCC-related fees? Will the company you've chosen cover the cost of switching your telephone service? If not, do you know how much it will cost? Are there other conditions that make the offer less attractive to you?

6. Make the choice

Contact the long-distance company of your choice. State whether you want the company for your local toll, for long-distance toll, or for all toll calls. The long-distance company will arrange with your local telephone company to ensure that your toll calls are automatically routed to its long-distance network.

7. Verify whether you are realizing the savings expected

Take a look at your phone bill after a month or two with your new provider. Are you saving money or getting better service? Review your bill periodically and remember to contact your provider when you think they may have a new and better plan for you.

**TOP
LONG
DISTANCE
COMPANIES
IN
WASHINGTON
BASED ON
REVENUES**

COMPANY	CUSTOMER SERVICE #
U S WEST Communications, Inc.	800-244-1111
AT&T Comm. of the Pacific Northwest, Inc .	800-222-0300
MCI Telecommunications Corporation	800-727-5555
Sprint Communications Company	913-624-6000
Worldcom Technologies	800-645-4284
Excel Telecommunications, Inc.	
d/b/a Excel Communications	800-875-9235
VarTec Telecom, Inc.	
d/b/a VarTec Telecom and U.S. Republic Comm.	800-544-1510
GTE Communications Corporation	888-483-3363
(formerly GTE Card Services, Inc.)	800-643-8399
Fox Communications Corp.	800-488-2312
S.V.V. Sales, Inc.	
d/b/a Arcada Communications	800-925-2289
Qwest Communication Corporation	800-860-2255
Association Communications	800-688-1007
Thrifty Call, Inc.	800-230-4576
TTI Telecommunications, Inc.	800-864-6832
Communications TeleSystems International	800-569-8700
Access Long Distance	800-574-5400
BLT Technologies	800-354-2708
Teleconnect Long Distance Service & System	
d/b/a TeleCom USA	800-444-4444
Working Assets Long Distance	800-788-0898
Claricom Networks, Inc.	800-678-9866
Phoenix Network, Inc.	800-864-0288
AmeriVision Communications, Inc.	888-822-2705
Gateway Technologies, Inc.	888-610-7079
Marathon Communications, Inc.	800-919-1800
NOS Communications, Inc.	888-569-4667
Touch 1 Long Distance, Inc.	877-868-2466
UniDial Incorporated	800-393-7300
Tel-Save, Inc.	888-825-5265
America One Communications, Inc.	888-346-5500
Cable & Wireless, Inc.	800-486-8686
IXC Long Distance	800-848-8459
Members' Long Distance Advantage	800-653-2669
United Services Telephone LLC	888-878-8575
The Furst Group, Inc.	800-233-4736
National Telephone & Communication	800-569-4682

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Source: Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission